

Food labels

More informed choices



**Always read
the label**











**FOOD
STANDARDS
AGENCY**



Nowadays, food labels seem to be packed with information. This booklet aims to help you pick out the information you need to make healthier, safer and more informed choices when you are choosing between products.

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A close-up photograph of a man with a friendly expression, wearing a red tank top. He is holding a white bowl in his left hand and a spoon with a portion of white food in his right hand, ready to eat. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**Healthy eating:
front of pack
traffic light colours**

If you want to eat a healthy diet, one of the key things you can do is try to cut down on fat (especially saturated fat), salt and added sugars. When you are checking food labels to choose which products to buy, traffic light colours can help you make that choice quickly and easily.

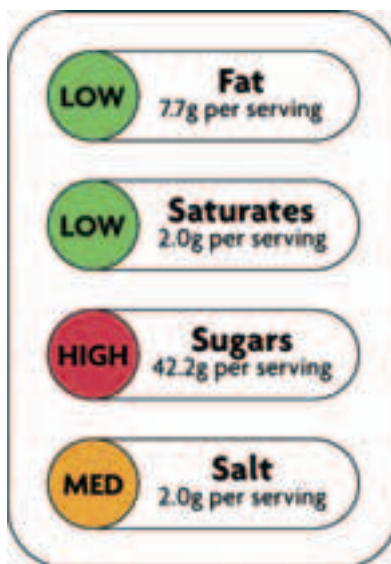
You may have seen products on sale with green, amber or red traffic light colours on the fronts of their packs. This is to help you see at-a-glance if the food has low, medium or high amounts of fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt.

What the colours mean

Green = Low

Amber = Medium

Red = High



Green means the food is low in fats, sugars and/or salt. The more green lights, the healthier the choice.

Amber means the food has a medium amount, so this is an OK choice most of the time, but you might want to go for green some of the time.

Red means the food is high in something we should be trying to cut down on. It's fine to have the food occasionally, or as a treat, but try to keep an eye on how often you choose these foods, or try eating them in smaller amounts. If your favourite foods get some red traffic lights, it's still fine to have them occasionally.

Many foods with traffic light colours will have a mixture of greens, ambers and reds. So, when you're choosing between similar products, try to go for products with more greens and ambers, and fewer reds. If the colours are similar, you can look at the amount of fat, saturates, sugars or salt, in a portion and choose the lower figure.

The colours make it easier to compare products at a glance. But remember, healthy eating is all about getting the overall balance right. Traffic light colours can help you choose between similar products and help you keep a check on the high-fat, high-sugar and high-salt foods you eat.

Check it out

Some products you might have thought were healthy choices could qualify for red lights. Try comparing the fat, saturates, sugars and salt levels of your favourite ready meal with those that qualify for a full set of green lights.

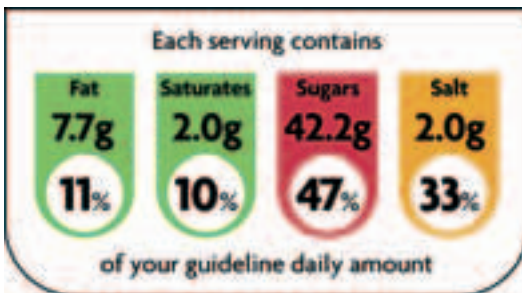
	Per serving
Fat	7.7g
Saturates	2.0g
Sugars	42.2g
Salt	2.0g

■ HIGH ■ MEDIUM ■ LOW

Different traffic lights – same signals

Different companies are using different designs for the traffic light colours. This means the traffic light label designs look different, but you can still compare these foods because the companies are all using the Food Standards Agency guidelines.

To find an up-to-date list of the stores and food producers that are using traffic light colours, see the Agency's eatwell website at: eatwell.gov.uk/trafficlights



The nutrition panel explained



Nutrition Information

Nutrient	Per 100g	Per 400g
Energy	404.6KJ/97Kcal	1618.4KJ/388Kcal
Protein	63.0g	25.5g
Carbohydrate	9.6g	38.4g
of which sugars	2.0g	8.0g
starch	7.7g	30.8g
Fat	3.6g	14.6g
of which saturates	1.3g	5.0g
monounsaturates	1.4g	5.4g
polyunsaturates	0.7g	2.6g
fibre	1.6g	6.4g
sodium	0.2g	0.8g
salt	0.5g	2.0g

You might see a panel like this on the back of food packs. It gives the nutritional breakdown of the food. You can use this information to help you make healthier choices.



Manufacturers must provide nutrition information if the label makes a nutritional claim such as 'low-fat' or a health claim such as 'maintains flexible joints', or if they have voluntarily added vitamins and minerals.

Sometimes manufacturers voluntarily provide nutrition information even when they have not made a claim.

Information will be given in terms of 100g or 100ml of the food for the following nutrients:

- energy (in kJ and kcal)
- protein (in g)
- carbohydrate (in g)
- fat (in g)

You might also see:

- sugars (in g)
- saturates (in g)
- fibre (in g)
- sodium (in g)

If a claim has been made about any other nutrient, the amount of the nutrient will also appear. These terms, and some others you might see, are explained briefly below.

Energy

This is the amount of energy in the food. It's measured either in calories (kcal) or kilojoules (kJ).

Protein

The body needs protein to grow and repair itself. Protein-rich foods include meat, fish, milk and dairy foods, eggs, beans, lentils and nuts.

Carbohydrate

The body turns carbohydrate into energy. Simple carbohydrates, which include added sugars and the natural sugars found in fruit and milk, are often listed on food labels as 'Carbohydrates (of which sugars)'.



Complex carbohydrates

(sometimes known as starchy foods) include bread, cereals, rice, pasta and potatoes. Try to base your meals on these sorts of foods and choose wholegrain when you can. Sometimes you will only see a total figure for carbohydrates on food labels.

Fat

Fat carries a lot of calories. Many food labels give figures for a product's fat content. Some food labels also break the figures down into different types of fat: saturates, monounsaturates and polyunsaturates.

Most of us know that we should be cutting down on fat. But it's even more important to try to replace the saturated fat we eat with unsaturated fat.

Saturated fat can raise blood cholesterol levels, which increases the chance of developing heart disease.

Monounsaturates and polyunsaturates

are both types of unsaturated fat. Unsaturated fats provide essential fatty acids that the body needs. So try to:

- use unsaturated oils such as olive, sunflower or rapeseed oils instead of butter, lard and ghee in cooking
- make your mashed potato with, say, olive oil and garlic instead of butter and milk
- choose a fat spread high in unsaturates instead of using butter

The following are all high in unsaturated fat: oily fish; avocados; nuts and seeds; oils and spreads made from sunflower, rapeseed and olive; and vegetable oils.

You could also opt for some oily fish instead of sausages or a meat pie, and try snacking on unsalted nuts or dry roasted seeds instead of a biscuit, or try other lower fat snacks – such as fruit.

Adults should have no more than 6g of salt or about 2.5g of sodium a day.

Dietary fibre

Most people don't eat enough fibre. We digest fibre-rich foods more slowly, which means they can help make us feel full for longer. So try to include a variety of fibre-rich foods in your diet.

There are two types of fibre:

Insoluble fibre

This is fibre that the body can't digest, so it passes through the gut, helping other food and waste products move through the gut more easily. Insoluble fibre helps to keep our bowels healthy and stop constipation. And this means we are less likely to get some common gut disorders. Wholegrain bread, brown rice, wholegrain breakfast cereals and fruit and vegetables all contain this type of fibre.

Soluble fibre

This fibre can be partially digested and may help to reduce the amount of cholesterol in the blood. Particularly good sources of soluble fibre include oats, and pulses such as beans and lentils.

Sodium and salt

Salt is often listed on food labels as sodium. Salt is made up of sodium and chloride. And it's the sodium in salt that can be bad for your health.

Salt = sodium x 2.5

Adults should have no more than 6g of salt or about 2.5g of sodium a day.

Eating too much salt can raise blood pressure. And people with high blood pressure are three times more likely to develop heart disease or have a stroke than people with normal blood pressure.

Three-quarters of the salt we eat comes from the everyday foods we buy. It's a good idea to check food labels so you can compare products and choose those with less salt in them.

List of ingredients

Ingredients

Potato (45%), Salmon (20%), Prawn (5%), Water, Milk, Onion, White Wine, Double Cream, Skimmed Milk Powder, Modified Maize Starch, Low-Fat Cheddar cheese, Fish, Bouillon (Salt, Dehydrated Cod, Potato, Starch, Sugar, Milk Powder, Yeast Extract, Palm Oil, Yeast Powder), Concentrated Lemon Juice, Parsley, Flavouring, Mustard Powder, Pepper.



Ingredient lists provide useful information about what's in your food. With a few exceptions, all pre-packed foods must be labelled with their ingredients, listed in descending order of their weight.

If an ingredient is mentioned in the name, such as chicken in 'chicken pie', or is shown on the label, the amount contained in the food must be given as a percentage. This allows you to compare similar products.

Single ingredient foods, for example cheese, sugar and butter, don't need to give a list of ingredients. Neither do alcoholic drinks (above 1.2% vol.), though these products do need to say if they contain a food that some people could be allergic to.

Where an ingredient is made up of several other ingredients, all the individual ingredients, with a few exceptions, must be given on the label – for example, the ingredients of the mayonnaise used in a potato salad.

Additives

Most food additives must be included either by name or by their E number in the ingredient list. The ingredient list must also say what type of additive it is, such as a 'colour' or a 'preservative'.

Any flavourings used in a food must be listed in the ingredient list as 'flavouring/s' or with a more specific description, such as 'chicken flavouring'.



Allergy information explained

Always check the ingredients on a food label to see if it contains the food you need to avoid.

Some food labels have a statement or an allergy advice box saying they contain a certain food. Some manufacturers use symbols to show this. But you can't rely on these, so always check the ingredient list to make sure.

If any of the following 14 foods are used as an ingredient in pre-packed food (throughout Europe), by law they need to be mentioned on the label:

- celery
- cereals containing gluten (this means wheat, barley, rye and oats)
- crustaceans (such as lobster and crab)
- eggs
- fish
- lupin
- milk
- molluscs (including mussels, oysters and squid)
- mustard
- nuts (such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, Brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts)
- peanuts
- sesame seeds
- soybeans
- sulphur dioxide and sulphites (preservatives used in some foods and drinks) at levels above 10mg per kg or per litre

Labels also need to give clear information about any ingredients

made from these foods (for example an egg glaze). However, some ingredients made from these foods are so highly processed that they won't cause allergic reactions. These ingredients don't need to be specially labelled, for example refined soya bean oil and glucose syrups made from wheat or barley.

What does 'may contain' mean?

Some food labels say 'may contain nuts' or 'may contain seeds'. This means that even though nuts or seeds haven't been included in the food deliberately, the manufacturer can't be sure that the product doesn't accidentally contain small amounts of them.

If you have a nut or seed allergy, or you're buying food for someone else who does, you should avoid these food products.

If you think you might have either a food allergy or a food intolerance, it's important to get a proper diagnosis. Don't cut food groups out of your diet without medical advice, because you could miss out on important nutrients.

More detailed guidance on food allergy and intolerance can be found at: eatwell.gov.uk/allergy

Claims on labels



Fat free

**REDUCED
SALT**

**NO ADDED
SUGAR**

**LOW
FAT**

Light

Misleading labels

It's illegal for a food label to give 'false' or 'misleading' information, which includes any words, claims, pictures or graphics. If you think there is false or misleading information on a label, contact your local trading standards or environmental health department. You can find details by visiting www.tradingstandards.gov.uk and typing in your postcode.

Marketing terms

Marketing terms such as 'fresh', 'pure', 'natural' and 'traditional', which are often used to describe foods, don't have legal definitions. The Food Standards Agency has published guidance for manufacturers, retailers and caterers on a range of commonly used terms, to encourage them to use the terms consistently.

For example, the word 'natural' shouldn't be used with foods that contain artificial additives and flavourings, and the word 'fresh' shouldn't be used for juices made from concentrate. The word 'pure' could be used to describe butter, but not a vegetable spread containing a mixture of butter and olive oil.

Health and nutrition claims

When you see these sorts of claims on food labels, you need to view them with caution, because they aren't yet all defined in law. This means that they can mean different things on different food products.

The term 'low-fat' is an example of a claim that has been defined. It means the product should contain no more than 3g of fat per 100g. Whereas claims such as 'helps maintain a healthy heart' have yet to be defined.

The Food Standards Agency is working on new rules, so that only claims defined by law will be allowed on food labels. This will make it easier for people to trust the sorts of claims we see.

In the meantime, you will need to try to check the claims yourself by looking at the nutrition panel (see page 8) and by checking the ingredient list (see page 12).

Dates on labels



Most food products must be labelled with a date mark. The important dates to look out for are the 'use by' and the 'best before' dates.

Use by

This is the key date in terms of safety. You will usually find a 'use by' date on food that goes off quickly, such as meat, fish, milk, soft cheese and packet salads. It's important to store these sorts of foods properly to make sure they last until the 'use by' date. Make sure you follow the storage instructions given on the pack.

If a food can be frozen you can use it after the 'use by' date. Just make sure you follow any instructions on the pack – such as 'freeze on the day of purchase' and 'defrost thoroughly before use and use within 24 hours'.

It's also important to follow any instructions for cooking and preparation shown on the label.

Best before

'Best before' dates tend to be about quality rather than safety. You will usually see these dates on foods that last longer – such as frozen, dried or tinned foods.

It should be safe to eat food after the 'best before' date, but the food might begin to lose its flavour and texture and no longer be at its best.

One exception is eggs. To enjoy eggs at their optimum quality you shouldn't eat them after the 'best before' date. Eggs can contain salmonella, and evidence shows that the risk of illness increases if people eat eggs that are contaminated and are getting older, and haven't been properly stored.

It's especially important for children, pregnant women, older people and anyone who is unwell not to risk eating eggs after the 'best before' date. Eggs should always be stored in the fridge and cooked properly – until the yolks and whites are solid.

Other dates

You might also see 'sell by' or 'display until' dates. These are to help shop staff know when to remove a product from sale.

Vegetarian and vegan labelling





Vegetarian and vegan

There is no single legal definition of the word 'vegetarian' or 'vegan' in the UK or Europe. The Food Standards Agency has published guidance to encourage manufacturers, retailers and caterers to use these terms consistently.

If a food is labelled vegetarian, this means that the food shouldn't contain any meat, fish or poultry, etc., or animal-derived additives such as gelatine. In the case of cheese, it means that animal-derived rennet shouldn't have been used to make it. If a food is labelled vegan, this means that the food shouldn't contain any animal products, including those from living animals – such as milk. More on vegetarian and vegan labelling can be found at: eatwell.gov.uk/foodlabels/labellingterms/vegetarian



Other important information

Name of a food

It's illegal for a food to have a false or misleading name on its label, and it's important that the name of the food accurately describes the food.

The name should also tell you if the food has undergone any type of treatment or processing where it might be misleading not to say so, for example 'UHT milk', 'dried apricots' or 'smoked mackerel'. More information on names of products can be found at: **eatwell.gov.uk/foodlabels**



Place of origin

Some foods, for example beef, fish and potatoes, and most fruit and vegetables, must have labels saying which country they have come from. Other foods (including ready meals) only need to give their origin if the purchaser would otherwise be misled.

Contacting the manufacturer

The label must give the name and address of the manufacturer, packer or seller of the food, so you can contact them if you have any concerns or want to know more.

Net quantity of pre-packed foods

When the symbol **e** appears after a figure for weight or volume, this means that the weight or volume shown will be an accurate average, although the actual weight or volume of the contents might vary slightly from the figure given.

If you are not satisfied with this product please contact us on our customer helpline
Freephone 0800 000000
Your statutory rights are not affected

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Country Foods
125 Kingsway, London WC2B 6NH
www.eatwell.gov.uk



400 g e

Use by: see front of pack

For further information and advice about food,
visit the Food Standards Agency's websites:

eatwell.gov.uk

food.gov.uk

salt.gov.uk

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